

THE ARTHUR SUNSHINE HOME
AND NURSERY SCHOOL
FOR THE BLIND

NURSERY SCHOOL DEPARTMENT



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REPRINT
The Teachers Forum for Instructors of Blind Children
November, 1935

EDWARDS BROTHERS, INC.
ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

1937



HV1661
M58
COPY 1

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

*Lithoprinted by Edwards Brothers, Inc., Lithoprinters and Publishers
Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1937*

THE ARTHUR SUNSHINE HOME AND
NURSERY SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND:
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Barbara Mitchell

At the Arthur Sunshine Home and Nursery School for the Blind the nursery school teachers try to keep ever before them the objective of giving their small physically-handicapped pupils a foundation of habits and attitudes which will prepare them for taking their place on an equal footing with seeing boys and girls of their own age.

It is not our aim to have the children merely ape the seeing child for we want them to develop as individuals with rich potentialities of their own. We feel that this is the surest way of helping them become well-adjusted, acceptable members of society. Therefore emphasis is laid on richness and breadth of experience, and on the child's ability to interpret and make use of this experience. Since much of the blind child's knowledge must come from actual contact with things, we have found that one of the first necessities is to concentrate on the removal of those fears which inhibit the child from seeking constructive experiences. To help the children orient themselves as freely and accurately as possible they are encouraged to run up and down hills and in and out of gates and buildings entirely by themselves. They are also trained to take directions from a distance. In this way they respond surprisingly well to directions, eventually making use of the terms forward, backward, right, left, and so forth. As they lose their fears they will be found doing such things as sliding down hill alone on

sleds or carts, jumping from piles of blocks higher than they are tall, pounding nails and sawing wood, and caring for their pets.

Another thing which we stress as part of their fundamental equipment for gaining experience is the good use of their hands. For this purpose they are taught to manipulate many objects and to describe what they have handled, and then to interpret it in some way, as for instance through their carpentry work or in play. In giving the children this training we find it very important to make sure that the child relates the verbal description of the thing with the actual sensory experience of it.

Other fundamental concepts which we try to establish in the minds of these children before they enter schools or classes for the blind are those of time and of number. They learn to recognize the main divisions of the day; the difference between yesterday, today and tomorrow; and they have some idea of weeks, months, and seasons. This, together with the counting of objects, the measuring of parts for their carpentry work, and some of the spontaneous games which they play, all work together to give them an appreciation of numbers which seems to be most important for the adequate adjustment of the children in the schools to which they will go.

Theoretically, the children leave the nursery and enter the nursery school when they are two or two and a half, but actually these particular babies whom we have had at the Arthur Home during the last year have been too retarded in development, although probably not in innate ability, to permit of their entrance into the nursery school as soon as this. During the next few months three or four of the children who have developed sufficiently will join the nursery school group, but probably this will not be before they have reached the age of three years.

During the past year, the lower age limit has varied from three and a half to four. Because of the fact that the institution used to take older children, we have had left over in the group this year a boy and a girl who were about nine. Now that they have left, our group is strictly within the age limit which we have tentatively established as being the wisest, that is, under seven. During the last year the intelligence quotients of the nursery school group have ranged from 55 for the oldest child to 141 for one of the youngest. These ranges in mental and physical ages would seem to complicate our problems sufficiently. However, we have also had children coming for special training who have stayed for periods ranging from a few weeks to two or three months. Usually, however, the number of children in the nursery school group is somewhere around nine. It can easily be seen that only a very informal and flexible program could meet the needs of each of these children with their varied abilities and disabilities.

Our curriculum in the nursery school group includes morning assembly, during which the children sing the songs that they particularly like, and either tell stories or ask to have one or two read to them by the teacher. For a good many months the stories told by the children were usually about the experiences they had had the day before. This was done in order to give them a sense of past and present time, in order that they might look upon their activities as having continuity. After assembly the children go outside for the rest of the morning. They devote their outdoor time to projects, trips, games, and various seasonal activities. At the middle of the morning there is orange or other fruit juice. This period brings the group together for a brief time of quiet, and also offers an opportunity for training the children to pour and pass liquids. After dinner there is a fairly long rest period which is

followed by rhythmic work and corrective exercises. The rest of the afternoon is given to free play out-of-doors.

Even more than would be done for seeing children, the activities of this group have been based upon the fundamental necessities of life such as food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and social group activities. A few words about the projects relating to food may give some idea of the type of activity we are stressing. In the spring the children planted gardens, watered them, and watched them grow. For the most part only those vegetables were planted which could be eaten raw when they were later pulled up by the children. On rainy days the group cooked various things such as eggs from a nearby farm, desserts, candy and popcorn. In warm weather they made their own sandwiches for picnics. Several times they have been downtown to purchase meat and fish which they later cooked out-of-doors or over electric plates in small frying pans. In order to relate food to the beginnings of social training, they have prepared and served such things as lemonade and cookies for parties which they have planned themselves and for which they have acted as hosts to various people of the institution whom they invited. Through these activities they have learned the names of food, their characteristics, their source, and even a little about their purpose. They have also gained some idea of the part played by different people such as the butcher and the cook in the preparation of food before it is served.

Relevant to this is their training in learning how to eat. Because of the fact that ours is a residential school it is possible for us to teach the children table manners during their regular meal times. This means that at least one of the teachers must be on duty at dinner and supper. The mechanics of eating are infinitely more difficult for a child

who does not see than for one who does. However, after a few months of persistent, patient training the children are learning to eat with a fork from a flat plate, although they still need the help of a pusher. Here again we have tried to keep in mind the special needs of blind children and we have therefore not insisted upon an exact reproduction of the manners of seeing children. We have had our children use pushers to guide the food to their forks because in this way they eat much more neatly and less conspicuously.

Because of the fact that most of our children are suffering from physical or behavior problems in addition to their blindness, it has been necessary for us to lower our requirements for them during their earlier years. But it is our goal to have the blind children reach a parity with those who see by the time they are of school age. This applies to neatness and inconspicuousness in eating, skill in dressing themselves, extent of meaningful vocabulary, richness of experience, and so forth.

Since the children learn to dress themselves as soon as possible they know various ways of fastening their clothes, they know where they should be hung, and they know something about the relationship between certain types of clothing and the weather. They are taught to take care of their clothes and to put them away, in so far as this is possible for children of their age. We do not mean to expect more of them in this respect than would be demanded of seeing children of corresponding age, but because of the fact that order is of even greater importance to a blind person than to one who sees we feel it is necessary to impress order and neatness upon the children.

Through their dressing and undressing themselves, their care of their own clothing, and their

washing of their dolls' clothing, they have learned something about materials and the places from which those materials come. There are times, too, when the children must scrub their own clothes as a necessary consequence of their own misdeeds.

The arrangement of rooms, the relationship of different rooms to each other, and the proportions and construction of a house are things which it is very hard to make meaningful to small blind children. A seeing child knows the arrangement of a room without even thinking about it, he knows which rooms have entrances into other rooms, and he knows that the ceiling of one room is the floor to another. The blind pre-school child must learn these things through actual contact with the objects and through a reproduction of them in play. Our older girls have the care of a rather large doll house for which they painted the furniture, with some help from the boys. They are responsible for keeping the floors and furniture clean and in order, although it must be confessed that their sense of responsibility with regard to these particular matters is still not fully developed. The furniture in the doll house is as nearly like that of a real house as possible. One corner representing the kitchen has a two-burner, unattached gas stove, nails on which to hang real pots and pans, unbreakable dishes and real knives and forks with a regular box to hold them. Our experience has taught us that most household toys are not sturdy enough to be practicable for use with such young visually-handicapped children because the toys are too likely to be pushed off from tables or to be stepped on. Also, most of them are too small for a blind child to gain a real idea of their use through actual experience. Therefore, as far as possible we have gotten large, sturdy equipment.

Next to the kitchen in this doll house is an oilcloth-covered table which the children can set when they are playing parties. In another corner is a doll's bed beside which is a dresser for the doll clothes. There are also a trunk and a small suitcase, both of which they are fond of packing and carrying around. The chairs and a cabinet are constantly being shifted from one place to another, too. Our one nine-year-old girl, who has some vision but is of border-line mentality, has been given the chief responsibility for the care of the doll house. Although the house itself is far from immaculate the experience which this child has gained has done much to develop in her at least a little sense of responsibility.

On rainy days most of the children are made to feel that they are helping to clean the nursery schoolroom by being allowed to use pails and mops and dust cloths in there. Frequently individual children are given other small cleaning-up jobs to do which make them feel very important.

All their experience in connection with houses we try to make meaningful to them by checking their understanding of what they have been doing through the use of questions, the invention of stories, and through games at orienting themselves within any given room.

The children have been particularly interested in the construction of houses because many have been built in our immediate neighborhood during the last few months. We visited these houses many times and found them in all stages of construction, so that eventually the children could recognize such materials as wood, brick, stone, shingles, and pipes. They were especially intrigued by the cranes which were used to dig out the cellars. The children were especially fortunate in being able to look over the

crane, to learn how big it was and how it worked. We had a toy crane which could be operated by having a child sit on it, and with the use of this particular toy two or three of the children dug many cellars in the sand piles. One cellar, larger than the others, was made in the ground near one of the buildings by the use of the crane and shovels. This cellar was used for a small house which they built of bricks and of cement blocks which the Home happened to have. These blocks were not only laid one upon the other as they were laid in the actual houses, but the children made their own cement and cemented the blocks together. They also made a cement floor and a small roadway.

Transportation has proven to be an unusually interesting project to these children. At times it has seemed as though the totally blind were even more interested in this particular subject than were the partially-seeing. The older members of the nursery school group have all been on trains, subways, street cars, elevated trains, buses, cars, and on various kinds of boats. They have been on row boats, ferry boats, and during a trip to New York they visited an ocean liner. On many of these means of transportation the children have had a number of rides and since each ride is taken as an opportunity for training, many of our children seem to us to be even better informed on the construction and operation of conveyances than is the average seeing child of the same age.

These trips have stimulated various play activities which have included the reproduction of methods of transportation in carpentry work and their incorporation in dramatic play. Trains, boats, and aeroplanes have been made out of clay and out of wood and blocks. Toys resembling the actual conveyances have been introduced at about the same time.

Possibly there is some doubt, psychologically speaking, of the value to be gained from the use of small objects to represent larger ones with blind children, but it seems to us that once the child has had contact with the actual objects the toys and models have been of great value.

We do not feel that we have yet solved the problem of using clay with pre-school blind children as effectively as we might. Thus far it has been our experience that when the children could not make what they were trying to model out of one piece of clay they began to lose interest. It may be that they are still too young to use the supplementary aids which can be introduced with slightly older children, as for instance, the sticks which help a clay elephant's legs support the weight of his body.

With the carpentry, although the results have been crude compared with those to be obtained from seeing children, nevertheless it was at least the children's own work. All of the older ones have learned to work with this medium and can now use a regular saw, find the groove alone, put in their own nails, and hammer them straight. We have found that cobblers' hammers and large-headed nails were of considerable assistance to blind children of this age level, probably because of the fact that these made it possible for the children's hands to be closer to the center of the operation.

Boats have been sailed in the outdoor pool during the warm weather and in the bath tubs during the winter and in bad weather. Stations, docks, and air-ports have been made in their carpentry work and have also been built out of small indoor blocks and the very large outdoor ones.

We have tried to give the children some feeling for community life through many trips downtown

and around the neighborhood. Whenever lumber and other supplies have been bought some of the children have usually gone along to the lumber yard. They have been to banks repeatedly and occasionally are allowed to buy something they want in the stores so that they have learned where different types of things are bought and have gained some idea of the value of money.

We have been unusually fortunate in having within easy reach an old-fashioned farm the owner of which, Mrs. Mary Brant, has a special interest in handicapped children and a genuine gift for extending their education without their knowing it. At the farm these tiny blind children have learned to recognize a cow from a horse and a turkey from a guinea hen. They have learned a little of the different types of feed which must be given to the different animals. They have rolled around in the hayloft, have tried to milk the cows, and have in general acquired a great wealth of experience at the same time that they have lost their fears.

In these pages I have tried to show in what way we are endeavoring to prepare pre-school visually-handicapped children for their entrance into schools and classes for the blind and partially-seeing. As yet no mention has been made of the partially-seeing because the child with some sight needs to have almost all of the same experiences as the blind child. Nevertheless, we have had the partially-seeing children use their sight and have taught them as seeing children in so far as it has been visually safe. The children know their colors, they have been allowed to use paints, and have been encouraged to describe objects in visual terms. During this last year, however, we have had so few children in the nursery school group who could be legitimately called partially-seeing that our problem has been largely that of adapting a program for use with the totally and educationally blind child.

Speaking generally, few adjustments have had to be made but these few seemed to be vitally important. It has been necessary to create more stimulation from the environment and to bring it, sometimes over objections, to the child's attention in order to offset the tendency of many of them to "just sit." Also, it has been essential not only to allow the children a large measure of freedom but actively to encourage their making use of this freedom in order that they may develop initiative, lose their fears, and learn to live and play independently. These adjustments have meant that there must be a more constant relationship between the teacher and the child than is true or desirable in a nursery school for seeing children. As the children develop more independence, however, it is possible to give them more and more time for independent play. Like seeing children, our visually-handicapped ones have been held rigidly to standards of their own level and are not allowed to slip because of their handicap. We should not expect as much of a blind child of three who is just learning to talk as we should expect of a three-year-old seeing child, but it is our hope that by the time this same child is ready for entrance into the first grade he will be running about independently, be capable of constructive independent play, and be ready intellectually for regular first grade work. In other words, our standards must rise much more steeply from year to year for these children than is true with seeing children, if they are to be on a parity with those who have full sight by the time they enter school.





